Thomas W. Shapcott

(21 March 1935 -)

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BOOKS: *Time on Fire* (Brisbane: Jacaranda, 1961);
Twelve Bagatelles (Adelaide: Australian Letters, 1962);
The Mankind Thing (Brisbane: Jacaranda, 1964);
Sonnets 1960–1963 (Brisbane: Officina Donagheana, 1964);
A Taste of Salt Water: Poems (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1967);
Focus on Charles Blackman (St. Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1967); revised and enlarged as *The Art of Charles Blackman* (London: Deutsch, 1990);
Fingers at Air: Experimental Poems (Ipswich, Qld.: T. W. Shapcott, 1969);
Inwards to the Sun: Poems (St. Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1969);
The Seven Deadly Sins: Poem for the Opera (Ipswich, Qld.: Queensland Opera Company, 1970);
Interim Report: Some Poems 1970/1971 (Ipswich, Qld.: T. W. Shapcott, 1971);
Begin with Walking, Paperback Poets, no. 11 (St. Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1972);
Two Voices: Poems, by Shapcott and Margaret Shapcott (Ipswich, Qld.: T. W. Shapcott, 1973);
Shabbytown Calendar (St. Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1975; St. Lucia & London: University of Queensland Press, 1987);
Seventh Avenue Poems (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1976);
Selected Poems (St. Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1978); revised as *Selected Poems 1956–1988* (St. Lucia & Portland, Ore.: University of Queensland Press, 1989);
Turning Full Circle (Sydney: New Poetry, 1979);
Make the Old Man Sing (Toronto: Coach House, 1980);
Flood Children (Milton, Qld.: Jacaranda, 1981);
Stump and Grape & Bopple-Nut: Prose Inventions (Brisbane: Bullion, 1981);
The Birthday Gift (St. Lucia & New York: University of Queensland Press, 1982);
Welcome!: Poems (St. Lucia & London: University of Queensland Press, 1983; St. Lucia & New York: University of Queensland Press, 1983);

Thomas W. Shapcott, 1986 (from Candida Baker, Yacker: Australian Writers Talk about Their Work, *1986; Paterno Library, Pennsylvania State University)*

White Stag of Exile (Melbourne: Lane, 1984; Ringwood, Vic. & New York: Penguin, 1984);
Holiday of the Ikon (Ringwood, Vic.: Puffin, 1985);
Hotel Bellevue (London: Chatto & Windus, 1986; Moorebank, N.S.W.: Black Swan, 1988);
Travel Dice (St. Lucia & London: University of Queensland Press, 1987; St. Lucia & New York: University of Queensland Press, 1987);

Limestone & Lemon Wine (London: Chatto & Windus, 1988; Moorebank, N.S.W.: Black Swan, 1990);
The Literature Board: A Brief History (St. Lucia & London: University of Queensland Press, 1988; St. Lucia & New York: University of Queensland Press, 1988);
The Search for Galina (London: Chatto & Windus, 1989; North Ryde, N.S.W.: Angus & Robertson, 1990);
Biting the Bullet: A Literary Memoir (Brookvale, N.S.W.: Simon & Schuster in association with New Endeavor, 1990);
His Master's Ghost, by Shapcott and A. R. Simpson (Ringwood, Vic.: McPhee Gribble/Penguin 1990);
In the Beginning, series 1, Pamphlet Poets, no. 6 (Canberra: National Library of Australia, 1990);
Mr Edmund, by Shapcott and Steve J. Spears (Ringwood, Vic.: McPhee Gribble/Penguin, 1990);
What You Own (North Ryde, N.S.W. & London: Collins/Angus & Robertson, 1991);
Mona's Gift (Ringwood, Vic. & New York: Viking, 1993);
The City of Home (St. Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1995);
Theatre of Darkness: Lillian Nordica as Opera (Milson's Point, N.S.W.: Random House, 1998; Milson's Point, N.S.W. & New York: Vintage, 1998);
The Sun's Waste Is Our Energy (Cambridge: Salt, 1998);
Chekhov's Mongoose (Applecross, W.A.: Salt, 2000; Cambridge: Salt, 2000);
Twins in the Family–Interviews with Australian Twins (Melbourne: Lothian, 2001).

PRODUCED SCRIPTS: *Gilgamesh,* libretto by Shapcott, music by Colin Brumby, Adelaide, Adelaide Festival, 1968;
Five Days Lost, libretto by Shapcott, music by Brumby, Perth, Festival of Perth, 1970;
The Seven Deadly Sins, libretto by Shapcott, music by Brumby, Brisbane, Queensland Opera Company, 1970;
Celebrations & Lamentations, libretto by Shapcott, music by Brumby, Brisbane, Inter-varsity Choral Festival, 1972;
This Is the Vine, libretto by Shapcott, music by Brumby, Melbourne, International Ecumenical Congress, 1972;
Bess Song, libretto by Shapcott, music by Brumby, Sydney, Sydney Opera House, 1974;
E Tarracho, libretto by Shapcott, music by Brumby, Adelaide, Adelaide Choral Society, 1975;
Flood Valley, libretto by Shapcott, music by Brumby, Adelaide, Adelaide Festival Theatre, 1976;
Five Poems for a Vittoria Mass, libretto by Shapcott, music by Brumby, Brisbane, University of Queensland Music Society, 1978;
Orpheus Bench, libretto by Shapcott, music by Brumby, Brisbane, University of Queensland, 1979;
Three Baroque Angels, libretto by Shapcott, music by Brumby, Brisbane, Inter-varsity Choral Festival, 1979;
Stump and Grape & Bopple-Nut, words by Shapcott, music by David Watson, Brisbane, Warana Festival, 1980;
Two Voices, libretto by Shapcott, Brisbane, Cement Block Theatre, Warana Festival, 1981;
Celebration Music, libretto by Shapcott, music by Bruce Mills, Brisbane, Commonwealth Games Festival, 1982;
Singing the Sun Down, libretto by Shapcott, music by Alan John, Adelaide, Adelaide Festival closing ceremony, 1984;
Three Australian Christmas Carols, libretto by Shapcott, music by Brumby, Adelaide, Pembroke School, 1984;
The Vision and the Gap, libretto by Shapcott, music by Brumby, Brisbane, University of Queensland, 1985;
The Ghost Cave O, libretto by Shapcott, Sydney, Newtown Hall, 1986;
The Ballad of Sydney Hospital, libretto by Shapcott, music by Brumby, Sydney, Sydney University, 1988;
Inheritance, libretto by Shapcott, music by Brumby, Sydney, Presbyterian Ladies' College, 1991;
Summer Carol, libretto by Shapcott, music by Brumby, Canberra Opera Company, 1991;
Old Tom's Numerical Prophecies, libretto by Shapcott, music by Gordon Monro, Sydney, Horizons Festival of Contemporary Australian Choral Music, Sydney Philharmonic, 1992;
Carol of the Holy Innocents, words by Shapcott, music by Brumby, Grosvenor Place, N.S.W., Australian Music Centre, 1999;
Those Who Are Compelled, words by Shapcott, music by Brumby, Grosvenor Place, N.S.W., Australian Music Centre, 1999.

OTHER: *New Impulses in Australian Poetry,* edited by Shapcott and Rodney Hall (St. Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1968);
Australian Poetry Now, edited by Shapcott (Melbourne: Sun Books, 1970);
Poets on Record, 14 titles, edited by Shapcott (St. Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1970–1975);
Contemporary American & Australian Poetry, edited by Shapcott (St. Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1976);

Poetry as a Creative Learning Process (Kelvin Grove, Qld.: Kelvin Grove College of Advanced Education, 1978);

Consolidation: The Second Paperback Poets Anthology, edited by Shapcott (St. Lucia, New York & Hemel Hempstead, U.K.: University of Queensland Press, 1982);

"Beware of Broken Glass: Models in a Room of Mirrors," in *The American Model: Influence and Independence in Australian Poetry,* edited by Joan Kirkby (Sydney: Hale & Iremonger, 1982), pp. 28–41;

Pamphlet Poets, series 2, 6 volumes, edited by Shapcott (Canberra: National Library of Australia, 1991);

Katica Kulakova, *Time Difference: Selected Poems of Katica Kulakova,* translated by Shapcott and Ilija Ẽašule (Macadonia: Zumpress, Skopje, 1998);

The Moment Made Marvellous: A Celebration of UQP Poetry, edited by Shapcott (St. Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1998);

An Island on Land: An Anthology of Contemporary Macedonian Poetry, translated by Shapcott and Ilija Ẽašule (North Ryde, N.S.W.: Macquarie University Press, 1999).

Thomas W. Shapcott is acclaimed as one of the most significant poets of Australia. James Tulip in *Southerly* (March 1983) calls him a "central reflecting intelligence of his generation." A lavish writer of poems, novels, and short stories, Shapcott has also collaborated with several composers, notably Colin Brumby. He reviews widely and has edited several major volumes. He has been awarded many prestigious national and international prizes, and in 1989 he was made an Officer of the Order of Australia. His work has been translated overseas, especially in Europe.

Shapcott believes that naming "our landscape, our culture is still the most important task . . . not as a set formula, but out of inner excitement." Poets, through listening to the quiet still voice within, must share with others so they may also be part of a wider listening and remembering. As he wrote in *Biting the Bullet: A Literary Memoir* (1990), one of his most passionate personal beliefs is "that from the small, the immediate, the personal and the anecdotal, it is possible to move, through a sort of resonance, to the larger implications and perspectives."

Born on 21 March 1935, Thomas William Shapcott is a twin. His was an insulated masculine family with two other brothers–one older, the other younger. Harold Sutton Shapcott, his father, was a public-spirited accountant in Ipswich, Queensland, and of English ancestry. His mother, Dorothy Mary (née Gillespie), was of Irish, Scottish, and Spanish background. Shapcott recalls in *Chekhov's Mongoose* (2000) a miserable childhood when the Great Depression "led to the War, / full employment and an air-raid shelter / where our own sandpit had been." He was first educated at West Ipswich State School, then, after a stressful although brief evacuation in 1941, at Blair State School in Ipswich. Shapcott learned tolerance of varying political beliefs because many of the students' parents were communists.

Ipswich, a medium-sized mining and industrial country town, was composed in part of migrants from the 1930s; it was a town of Welsh singers and musicians. Harold Shapcott was the secretary to the Victory Eidsteddfod (Druid festival of music and art). At ten, Thomas Shapcott showed a poem to a visitor to its literary section, who encouraged his interest in technique. As a growing boy, however, Shapcott more often felt exiled from culture in its broadest sense–from poetry, literature, and music. At Ipswich Grammar School, where he became a champion swimmer, he believes he learned little. At fifteen, wanting to become a journalist, he went to business college for six months, but, as he was unable to find work afterward, he began in his father's accountancy practice. For a while he attempted to compose music, but he felt that he had failed. His love of musical composition and music, however, has remained lifelong and is evident in his writing.

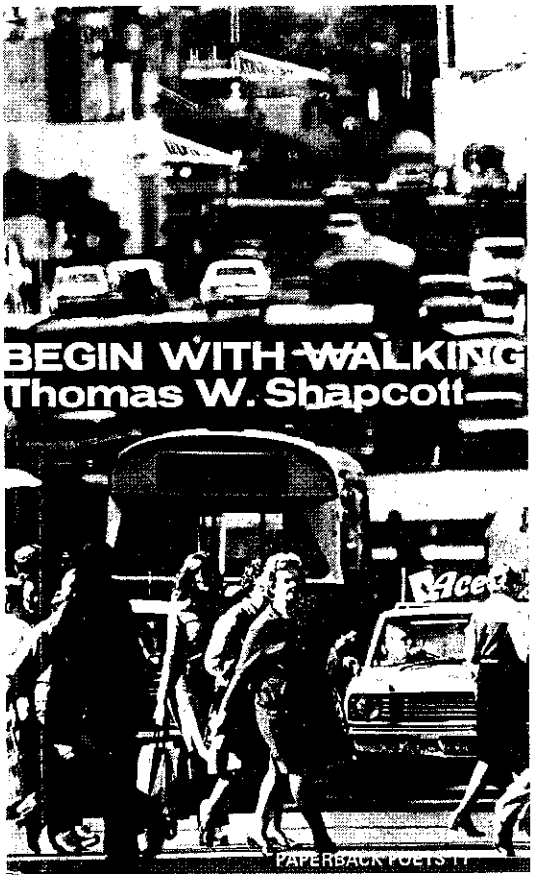
In 1954, when doing compulsory National Service training, "a crucial dislocation in my comfortable middle-class world," Shapcott told Jim Davidson in an interview for *Meanjin* (April 1979), he began to write poetry seriously. Discovering the richness of contemporary and past Australian literature both delighted and angered him, for he had grown up within the alienated constructions of colonial sensibilities. Reading avidly among the poets, from Francis Webb and T. S. Eliot to Dylan Thomas, he sought out experimental writing from both Australia and America. After the publication of some of his more formal poems in 1957 and having registered as a tax agent, he set off for Sydney in 1958 to introduce himself to the literati. In 1959 he returned to Ipswich, where Margaret Hodge, his future wife, was teaching. He worked with his father (by 1961 as a partner–in Shapcott and Shapcott). On 18 April 1960 he and Hodge married. They had four children–Katherine Margaret (born 23 December 1960), Alison Jane (born 8 December 1962), Richard Thomas Lloyd (born 1 September 1966), and Isabel Marion (born 5 June 1968). Parenting "opened" his "eyes" and "enriched" his "being," he recalled in *Biting the Bullet.*

Time on Fire (1961) was well reviewed as a first book of poems and won the Grace Leven Prize for poetry in 1961. Shapcott writes about growing up in southeast Queensland, about the love for Nature, about courtship and marriage, and about the birth of a daugh-

ter. Laurie J. Clancy, in *Meanjin Quarterly* (June 1967), notes the autobiographical coherence of the poems and their "delicate intimacy." The central theme, he finds, is the destruction of the poet's hope that the things of Nature are among the symbols of earthly permanence and immortality. *The Mankind Thing* (1964) examines the same subject matter. In the long poem "Two and a Half Acres," Shapcott tells of the family's settling on the land: "we claim this hill to rebuild for our sakes / an ordered world." Reviewers concur that the volume marks the poet's increasing maturity. Clancy finds Shapcott concerned no longer with the mere celebration of the things around him but also with the attempt to assess their significance. Shapcott shows an acute consciousness of the painfulness of the poet's task and what became a hallmark of his poems–his belief in the essential ambivalence of all human response: "Loss is no more true a word than gain." Evan Jones, however, writing in the *Australian* (3 March 1965), was scathing about the personal aspects of the poems. Shapcott, as a result, became more cautious of autobiographical frankness.

From 1963 to 1968 Shapcott studied for an arts degree at the University of Queensland. Through the challenge of studying French, the use of a persona in his poems, and his involvement in musical and cultural organizations, his ambition was allowed greater scope. Recognizing his ability, Gertrude Langer, leading art critic of Brisbane, encouraged him, asking, "What is your poetic?" In 1967 Shapcott's biographical study of Charles Blackman, a figurative painter then living in Brisbane, was published. It is a riveting and innovative account of the artist's creativity; the subtext is a dialogue between author and painter. Shapcott shows his ability to focus on core ideas, the mind drawing on his poetic gifts to express a dramatic narrative and grand visioning of the ordinary–and universal–dimensions of the artist's life.

In the late 1960s a quickening in Australian poetry occurred, and the editorial conservatism began to lift. Four books of Shapcott's poems appeared in rapid succession. They indicate his incredible repertoire of form, which ranges from free verse to sestinas and sonnets, and his linguistic richness and delight in wordplay. Shapcott is a conscious and careful craftsman. *A Taste of Salt Water: Poems* (1967) is his most important book from this period. In the year of its publication Shapcott was awarded the Colin Roderick Prize for Australian literature, the Sir Thomas White Memorial Prize, and the Sidney Myer Award for poetry (which he received again in 1969). The book is wide-ranging, with an important long historical poem about Lachlan Macquarie, the early governor of New South Wales, as a father. His next volume of poetry, *Inwards to the Sun,* was published in 1969. Critics presented opposing views on



Paperback cover for Shapcott's 1972 book, which includes poems of urban Australia and the Aboriginal landscape (Bruccoli Clark Layman Archives)

Shapcott's narrative and dramatic technique at this stage. Some, such as Alec King in *Meanjin Quarterly* (June 1968), see it as a real gift; others, such as Elizabeth Marsh in *Westerly* (October 1968), call it "rough."

A major strand of Shapcott's poems continues to record the daily life of a poet. These poems about poetry are praised by Carl Harrison-Ford. Shapcott believes writing is an act of discovery. Rather than a bulletin or progress report, the poem can be a forum for the struggles with identity. Poetry is a process rather than an end product. "Where ever I go I look and see / and I clothe myself with identity," says Everyman in *The Seven Deadly Sins: Poem for the Opera* (1970). Shapcott was keenly aware of the distinction between the formal challenges of purely visual poetry and poetry meant to be spoken.

Fingers at Air: Experimental Poems (1969) begins with explorations of the spatial tensions of laying words

upon a page and evolves toward the poem as sound. Harrison-Ford finds that Shapcott establishes that "through reason and example, song as a concept may precede singing." The introspection and analysis that discover this theory, the metacritical work, can also be the subject of poetry. On the other hand, in *Southerly* (30 April 1970), S. E. Lee chastises Shapcott for being diverted from his true medium, the traditional lyric. *Interim Report: Some Poems 1970/1971* (1971) includes the important Bess songs and "Miss Norah Kerrin Writes to Her Betrothed," which explores the experience of the colonial woman. As Harrison-Ford finds, Shapcott's characteristic personal style emerges, incorporating his personal and aesthetic concerns more fruitfully.

From the late 1960s Shapcott worked with Colin Brumby, who became one of the foremost composers in Australia. In 1968 Brumby set "Gilgamesh" to music; they worked together on "Five Days Lost," commissioned by the Festival of Perth for narrator and orchestra in 1969. "Bring Out Your Christmas Masks" was scored for three sopranos, tenor, baritone, mixed chorus, boys' chorus, speaker, and orchestra. *The Seven Deadly Sins* was a "noble failure," according to Roger Covell, the noted critic in *The Sydney Morning Herald* (14 April 1970), even if Shapcott was least to blame. Maria Preauer, however, in *Nation* (31 October 1970) describes it as "a timeless encounter between Everyman and the Sins," "updated with a hundred deft touches—like a mod slant to *Sloth* with obvious jibes to *O Calcutta.*" The first ever Queensland opera produced by the state company, it played to packed houses for twelve nights. Shapcott and Brumby went on to produce many works, their collaboration one of the most important in Australia during the 1970s.

Shapcott also worked with other composers—such as David Watson, Bruce Mills, and Alan John—and provided the libretto and script for many gala performances, from music theater to the opening (or closing) ceremonies of the Commonwealth Games and arts festivals. Some were full-scale productions and went on interstate or overseas tours; many were specially commissioned, and others were settings for existing poems. Shapcott collaborated with the Graham Jones Kinetic Energy Dance Group on many occasions.

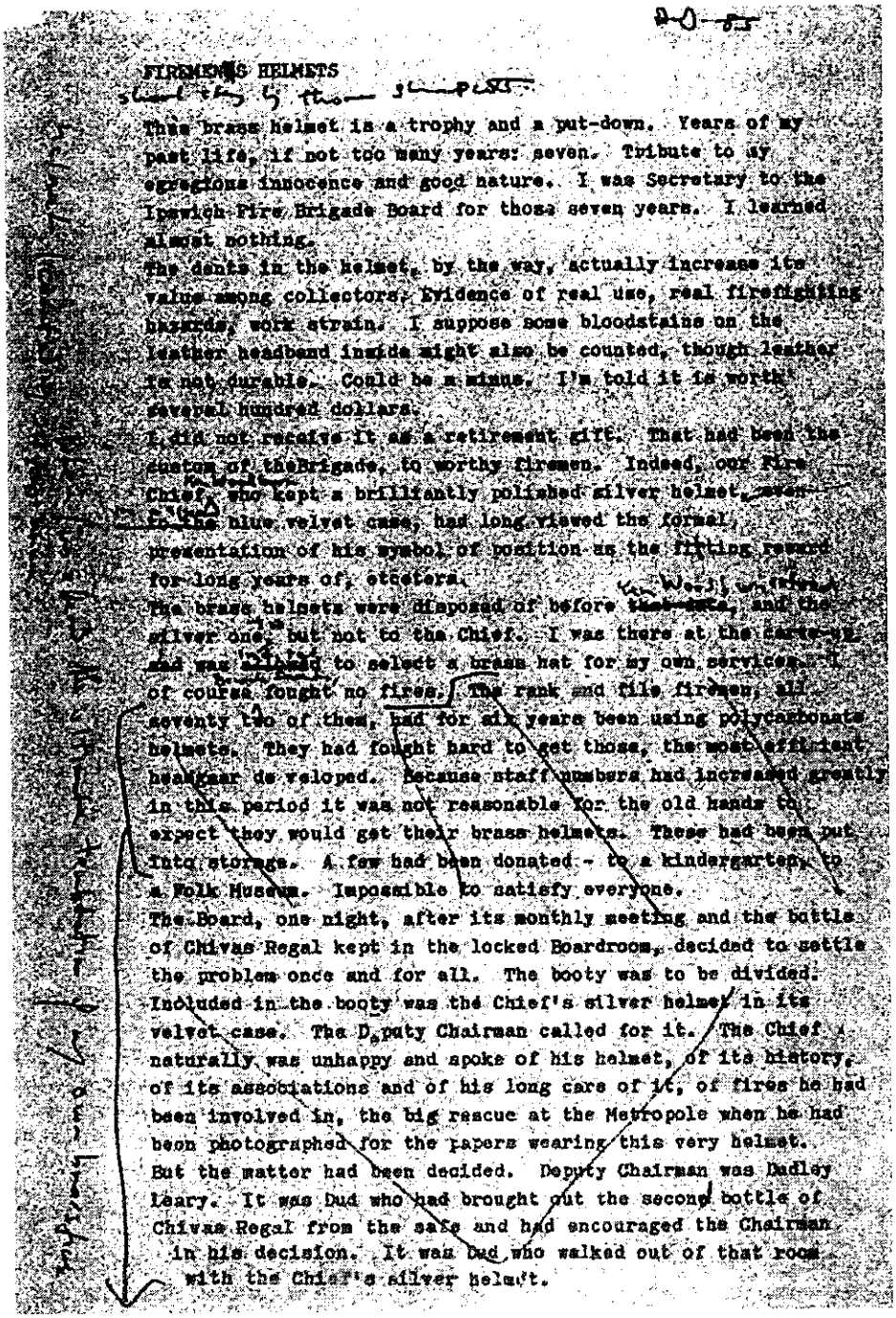
Receptive to the work of other contemporary poets, especially those more concerned with liveliness than rules, Shapcott has been active as an anthologist. *New Impulses in Australian Poetry,* edited with Rodney Hall in 1968, was followed two years later by *Australia Poetry Now.* A radically conceived collection of mostly unpublished work, foregrounding Michael Dransfield, *Australian Poetry Now* was reprinted by Sun Books in 1976. Dorothy Green, in the *Canberra Times* (20 February 1971), found "if there is not God's plenty of poetic quality, there is enough to excuse the editor's enthusiasm." She was more critical of gaps in the editor's scholarship—especially regarding previous poets—and his capacity to retreat "into an unassailable position" through vague generalizations.

Shapcott continued his work as an accountant throughout this period. From 1974 to 1978, working as a sole trader, he specialized in the arts. In 1972, however, a Churchill Fellowship to work on American and Australian poetry provided him "complete freedom" that enabled him to travel. He likened himself in an interview with Davidson to a "prisoner deprived not only of his bars but of his cage as well." Shapcott subsequently edited *Contemporary American & Australian Poetry* (1976), a selection intended (as he says in the introduction) to encourage the discovery of "not only each other, but oneself, and the neighbourhood of cultures."

Some poems Shapcott wrote while overseas were included in *Begin with Walking* (1972), which also includes important urban poems, notably "Brisbane Walking." "The Ghost Cave" is about a capacity to see the extraordinary ancient, rich, Aboriginal landscape rather than a barren terrain. A young white man manages to make a cultural leap with a key from his mystical experiences in Egypt. James Tulip in *Southerly* (June 1973) found that "Begin with Walking" was the most solid of all the poems in the volume. Shapcott himself, however, saw the book as a failure. On his return to Australia, Shapcott, to overcome a writer's block, sought out his origins as an act of exorcism. After working hours, he wrote about Ipswich and his past. He was traveling frequently as a foundation member of the Literature Board from 1973 to 1976 and was on the taxation advisory board of the Australia Council.

Shabbytown Calendar (1975) is Shapcott's best-known and most widely acclaimed work. Inspired by the musical structure of a series of Preludes, Interludes, and Fugues, the "calendar" of the provincial town (of Ipswich) changes from the "mango weather" of January to the "abundant sun" of November and December Christmas bells. It includes the playing off of brief poems about concrete things, people, and objects against what is once again essentially a personal discovery or meditation—that is, according to Shapcott in an interview for *Makar* in 1975, about how to work out a relationship with the past and the present. Alternating conflicting solutions are presented, leading to the underlying questions: "Can we live with the past? Can we live without a past?"

Shapcott continued to travel extensively overseas. In 1976, while in New York after a near-death experience, he decided to write full-time and sell the accountancy business—to end his "completely schizoid existence," as he described it to Davidson. He under-



FIREMEN'S HELMETS

This brass helmet is a trophy and a put-down. Years of my past life, if not too many years: seven. Tribute to my egregious innocence and good nature. I was Secretary to the Ipswich Fire Brigade Board for those seven years. I learned almost nothing.

The dents in the helmet, by the way, actually increase its value among collectors: Evidence of real use, real firefighting hazards, work strain. I suppose some bloodstains on the leather headband inside might also be counted, though leather is not durable. Could be a minus. I'm told it is worth several hundred dollars.

I did not receive it as a retirement gift. That had been the custom of the Brigade, to worthy firemen. Indeed, our Fire Chief, who kept a brilliantly polished silver helmet, even to the blue velvet case, had long viewed the formal presentation of his symbol of position as the fitting reward for long years of, et cetera.

The brass helmets were disposed of before that era, and the silver one, but not to the Chief. I was there at the carve-up, and was allowed to select a brass hat for my own services. I of course fought no fires. The rank and file firemen, all seventy two of them, had for six years been using polycarbonate helmets. They had fought hard to get those, the most efficient headgear developed. Because staff numbers had increased greatly in this period it was not reasonable for the old hands to expect they would get their brass helmets. These had been put into storage. A few had been donated - to a kindergarten, to a Folk Museum. Impossible to satisfy everyone.

The Board, one night, after its monthly meeting and the bottle of Chivas Regal kept in the locked Boardroom, decided to settle the problem once and for all. The booty was to be divided. Included in the booty was the Chief's silver helmet in its velvet case. The Deputy Chairman called for it. The Chief naturally was unhappy and spoke of his helmet, of its history, of its associations and of his long care of it, of fires he had been involved in, the big rescue at the Metropole when he had been photographed for the papers wearing this very helmet. But the matter had been decided. Deputy Chairman was Dudley Leary. It was Dud who had brought out the second bottle of Chivas Regal from the safe and had encouraged the Chairman in his decision. It was Dud who walked out of that room with the Chief's silver helmet.

Page from the revised typescript for "Fireman's Helmets," a short story collected in Limestone and Lemon Wine, *published in 1988 (from Candida Baker,* Yacker: Australian Writers Talk about Their Work, *1986; Paterno Library, Pennsylvania State University)*

took several writer-in-residencies. At Kelvin Grove College of Advanced Education, he produced a booklet at the end of the course. *Seventh Avenue Poems* (1976), "skinny poems" as he called them in an interview for *Artlook* (November 1979) written in New York, continued his experimentation, adapting what he had learned from his explorations into a tighter, leaner form. In 1978 he received the Canada Australia Literary Award. In 1980 he and Margaret divorced, and Shapcott went to stay in Italy.

Shapcott had always written poetry for young people; his first novel for children was *Flood Children* (1981), an exciting and visual narrative based on the disastrous 1974 floods. Also published in 1981, *Stump and Grape & Bopple-Nut: Prose Inventions*–for adults–is a collection of prose poems about a range of themes allowing free play to Shapcott's quirkiness of mind and delight in language. Shapcott references "the world without to explore the world within," finds Jim Legasse in *Westerly* (March 1982), comparing Shapcott to Søren Aabye Kierkegaard and Jean-Paul Sartre in their understanding "that objectified knowledge is always at one or more remove from the truth–Truth is subjectivity."

Shapcott's first novel for adults, *The Birthday Gift* (1982), draws in part on his own experiences as a twin. Through a series of minutely detailed vignettes set in the 1940s and 1950s, he tells the story of Ben and Benno and their search for identity and meaning. The two lives crisscross from childhood to maturity in Ipswich, Sydney, and Tuscany.

Shapcott's next novel, *White Stag of Exile* (1984), is described by Davidson in *Meanjin* (Winter 1984) as "A tour-de-force . . . a major achievement, both in the range of its concerns and insights." It is a story of Karoly Pulszky, director of the Hungarian National Gallery of Art, at the end of the nineteenth century, who was charged with embezzlement, and, while on his self-imposed exile in Australia, committed suicide. Davidson believes that in its density of writing, the depth of allusion, and the variety of experience encompassed, *White Stag of Exile* should broaden the sense of what is Australian. He calls it an "extraordinary book" in which "two elements of our cultural heritage"–the Australian and the European–are placed in juxtaposition and even integrated.

The book began when Shapcott found Pulszky's nondescript grave in the Toowong Cemetery, Brisbane. Pulszky, his parents, wife, daughter Romola, her husband, Nijinsky, and the whole network of aristocratic in-house intrigues captured Shapcott's imagination, as he pursued historical research–in Hungary and Queensland. In a set of discontinuous narratives, there are dramatic monologues, fictional documents, and real letters are interwoven with poem-inserts, which can be seen as both the versatile author's lyric gift and a widening of the genre. Those critics who found fault found it in the structure of the novel. Shapcott abnegates the historian's responsibility, argued the reviewer in *Island Magazine* (Spring 1984), leaving the reader to judge Pulszky's actions.

White Stag of Exile is considered Shapcott's most significant novel. Peter Balaban translated the text scrupulously into Hungarian. In 1988 Shapcott was invited to Budapest for his "Day of Triumph," the grand opening of an exhibition of the artworks collected by Pulszky during his term as director of the National Gallery. *White Stag of Exile* in translation sold out in Macedonia. In 1987 Shapcott edited an anthology of Australian poetry, which was launched, in Macedonian translation, at the Struga International Poetry Festival. The following year he was awarded the prestigious Golden Wreath of the festival; the bilingual (English/Macedonian) edition of Shapcott's poems had an unprecedented sale of fifteen thousand copies. That year, 1989, Shapcott was also awarded an honorary Litt.D. by Macquarie University. In 1990 he was involved as lector in a reciprocal translation project, to work on Ilija Ẽašule's English translations.

In 1985 Shapcott published *Holiday of the Ikon*, a second children's book, set on the family's favorite holiday place, Stradbroke Island. *Hotel Bellevue* (1986), fifty thousand words drafted in the first ten days, was finally published in 1986 after a dozen drafts. In commenting on his methods of work, Shapcott says he has learned to trust and accept his subconscious, his "internal computer," which does a huge amount of work before he starts. *Hotel Bellevue* is set in tropical and seedy Brisbane during the notoriously conservative Belkje Peterson government. An icon of the pastoral era, Hotel Bellevue is partially demolished by developers at midnight. Boyd Kennedy, an academic catapulted from his foundering marriage, arrives on a whim to stay at his grandmother's house, now rented by a group of young people involved in the demonstrations to preserve the hotel. The alternating narrative of Marie Kennedy in Melbourne, as she struggles to understand herself and her relationships, adds to the general themes of fragmentation and violation, loss and displacement–sexual, psychic, and material–through different dimensions of time. The book was favorably reviewed. Marion Halligan, in *The Canberra Times* (6 December 1986), notes that its elaboration is elegant and finally tragic. Davidson in *Overland* (March 1987), however, claims that in comparison with *White Stag of Exile*, and despite its many virtues, it does not quite deliver.

On 13 October 1982 Shapcott married Judith Rodriguez, a well-known Australian poet and educator. In 1983 he became director of the Literature Board, a

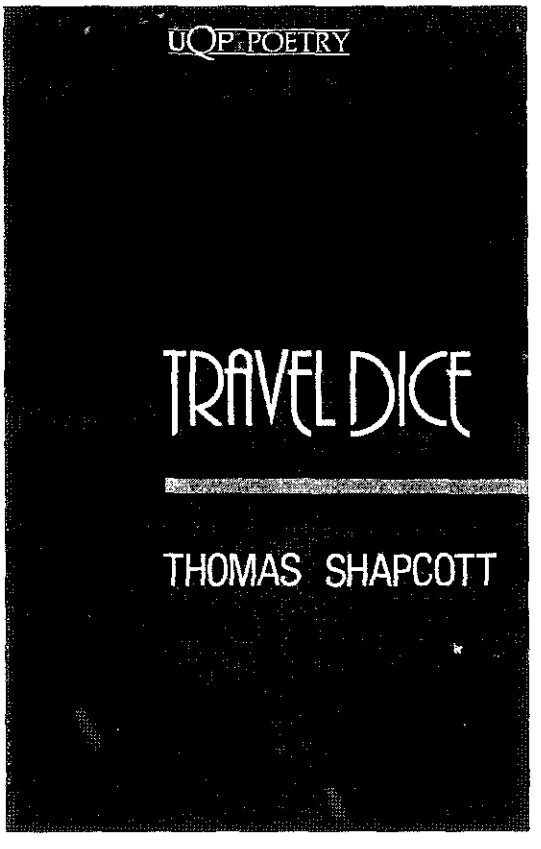
position he held until 1990. During his term of office, a period of cultural expansion in the arts, many innovative local, national, and international projects were established. Shapcott was responsible for a government report on price surveillance. *The Literature Board: A Brief History* (1988) covers the huge variety of tasks and work undertaken by the board and those beneficiaries of it and includes a wealth of factual detail and information.

Other nonfiction prose undertaken during the late 1980s includes the revision and extension of Shapcott's critical biography of Blackman as *The Art of Charles Blackman* (1990) with a further two sections tracing the artist's life and work during the 1970s and 1980s. Blackman's work, at the forefront of the international rise of Australian art, is beautifully collated by Robin Burridge. Shapcott's exposition allows readers insight into this artist. Blackman's attempt to paint pictures shaped by internal feelings and his struggle to capture the float of the intuitive subconscious into the mind parallels Shapcott's own technique. Shapcott is more poet than scholar; the inclusion of a panorama of recollections, articles, and comments by Blackman, however, lacks the freshness of his first volume.

Shapcott uses the same method of collation through a selection of essays, articles, speeches, and reviews in *Biting the Bullet: A Literary Memoir*. Rather than a developed argument, he offers instead views from "various thought-provoking angles." His section on the making of poetry is lucid and powerful. The milestones of his development as a writer, Judith Wright finds, in *Sun Herald* of Sydney (23 September 1990), are notes for an autobiography. She approves of his selection of "provocative" book reviews and believes his travel pieces are the "high point of the book." Portraits of David Malouf, Gwen Harwood, Bruce Beaver, Michael Dransfield, and Elizabeth Jolley, all well known to Shapcott, were specially scripted for the book. Shapcott is an elegant stylist, as John Hanrahan in *The Melbourne Age* (30 November 1990) notes. Even his speeches suggest his vision and courage.

While most reviews were favorable, Mark O'Connor, in *Quadrant* (May 1992), attacked Shapcott for the way he constructed himself as "self-revealer" (yet his revelations were hardly daring); "arts bureaucrat" (yet the role of the Literature Board declined); "literary figure" (yet he does not deal with major opponents); and as a "critic" (yet he is unrepresentative). Shapcott was not above the battle. Rosemary Wighton, Chairperson of the Literature Board, wrote to *Quadrant* (June 1992) in defense of Shapcott, and the correspondence became even more vituperative.

Shapcott believes poetry needs to be more widely appreciated. In his novels, poetry is often built into the narrative. In *The Search for Galina* (1989), which draws



Paperback cover for Shapcott's 1987 collection, which includes poems inspired by trips overseas (Thomas Cooper Library, University of South Carolina)

on a Russian iconography of suffering, the poems of Galina, a Russian poet exiled in Australia, are about the siege of Leningrad in 1941 to 1943. The protagonist, David Cumberland, is working on a book about the forests. Partly ironic, partly sympathetic, he is another of Shapcott's middle-aged male characters facing life challenges. An "imaginatively taunting and passionate" book, Dinny O'Hearn concludes in *Overland* (volume 116, 1989); Shapcott's search is to understand what it means to inhabit this land and survive spiritually.

Shapcott published three volumes of poetry in the 1980s, all praised for their breadth, thematic variety, and maturity. *Welcome!: Poems* (1983), concludes Ken Goodwin in *A History of Australian Literature* (1986), returns to Shapcott's most successful mode—that of the vulnerable, self-amused, self-celebrating existence in a specific locale, mostly Brisbane. *Travel Dice* (1987) includes many poems about overseas trips. Peter Porter, in *Australian Literary Studies* (October 1990), highlights

key aspects of Shapcott's *Selected Poems 1956–1988* (1989): his continuous experiment with language and the resources of poetry, his comprehensive picture of modern living, his use of dramatic monologue (happiest with characters on the point of losing their freedom to be themselves), and his successful use of the satiric and the ironic:

People who live by the open sewer
forget that it was once a shaded creek.
People who drive the bare road between Bulima and the airport
forget it was once a shade rainforest
People who live in development brick-veneer bungalows
have forgotten entirely whatever was once meant by words like 'community'
You will go far
taking us all with you.

Shapcott published many short stories during the 1980s. His first collection, *Limestone & Lemon Wine* (1988), is a patchwork of small-town (Limestone) lives in a series of interconnected stories. It is a social, economic, and emotional portrait at once ordinary and not so ordinary, with insights into the dynamics of private, family, and working lives. "Lemon Wine" is the story of Norma and Mick's dinner party to which they invite the new Italian restaurateur and his wife. Alberto saves the evening with the sharing of his recipe. Shapcott's second volume of short stories, *What You Own* (1991), has three sections–"What You Have," "What You Leave," and "What You Own." He explores the interconnections between identity, memory, and the values, especially possession, of a materialist culture.

From 1990 to 1992 Shapcott again worked as a full-time writer. In late 1992 he was appointed executive director of the National Book Council until 1997. His next novel, *Mona's Gift* (1993), tells the story of Michael's search into the life of his aunt and her passionate love affair with Ted Stephen, an army doctor during World War II. After Mona Enright dies, her nephew, Michael, is bequeathed a jumble of letters, diaries, and newspaper clippings. Michael rediscovers a younger Mona, charismatic matron of a hospital for babies, whose first erotic encounter with Stephen takes place in an elaborate terraced Japanese garden. Stephen serves on the Kokoda Trail in New Guinea. The female-male sexuality is the core of the book. Whether because of the struggle for possession, Stephen's traumatic experience in the army, or unresolved class conflicts, the relationship falters, but Mona emerges for her nephew as giving the gift of herself.

Shapcott had been fascinated by the Mosman-Cremone area of Sydney Harbour since he had lived there in 1958. When he began to write about it in 1990, the character of Mona emerged. Shapcott believes that a male writer should be able to write about women and their sexuality–despite the subject's being political. While Shapcott has used discontinuous narrative and juxtapositions of time previously, in *Mona's Gift*, through the character of Michael, speculation and imagination are allowed more scope. The book was favorably reviewed. Venero Armnanno in *Imago* (1993) finds it has an immaculate, almost seamless feel for life in Sydney, and he finds its insight into jungle warfare to be the most powerful he has read.

The City of Home (1995), Shapcott's most important collection of poems in recent years, includes eight long sequences of meditations that address different themes. "The River in Brisbane" combines a celebration of nature with a sophisticated historical sensibility–"We all shrink in the drought years, / reminded of our own poisons." Several short lyrical pieces are devoted to Itchy Park–a vivid, childhood, special place. Separate poems address the involvement of Australia in the first Gulf War, and the victory celebrations after World War II in Ipswich. Kevin Hart, in *The Age* (18 November 1995), found *The City of Home* a rich meditation on the realization that naming is both a form of appropriation and a mode of loss. The book won the New South Wales Premier's Special Award and the Wesley Michel Wright Prize for poetry.

"Music, obsession, fame and love" is the subtitle for *Theatre of Darkness: Lillian Nordica as Opera* (1998), Shapcott's reconstruction of the last months of the life of American opera singer Lillian Nordica after she was shipwrecked in the Torrens Strait and nursed with pneumonia on Thursday Island. Siegried Fomorian, the other principal character in the novel, is an obsessive phrenologist who spies on Nordica and is barely prevented from killing a two-year-old island girl to steal her skull. He casts himself bathetically in the struggle for recognition and fame in the role of Siegfried to Nordica's Brunnhilde. Nordica is a remote figure increasingly haunted by her memories. She sings for the young and naive Quetta Braun–the past made whole and potent in the present–giving form to Shapcott's credo. Katharine England, in the *Adelaide Advertiser* (7 February 1998), believes *Theatre of Darkness* is Shapcott's most accessible novel, the most relaxed and entertaining; he has jettisoned the stiffness of earlier novels without jeopardizing his experimental edge or his metaphysical underpinnings.

Shapcott is presently Professor of Creative Writing at the University of Adelaide, a position to which he was appointed in 1997. In 1998 he edited *The Moment Made Marvellous: A Celebration of UQP Poetry*, a selection of contemporary Australian poetry, marking the fiftieth anniversary of the University of Queensland Press.

From 1999 to 2000 he was the director of the Adelaide Theatre Centre. He continues his high-profile contribution to the cause of Australian literature. In 2000 he won the Patrick White Award. *Chekhov's Mongoose,* published the same year, includes more of his philosophical musings on the nature of the world, with even deeper probes into different phases of his life–especially childhood, the body, and the environment–ever stepping off from the immediate into sometimes disruption, sometimes joy. The issue of twinship was again his focus in a study of twins in Australia, *Twins in the Family–Interviews with Australian Twins* (2001).

Shapcott's continual experimentation and his breakthrough into the rawness of the immediate and of place ensures his importance in the future. The strand of Shapcott's poetry that resonates so strongly with his public–the personal chord, his contextualizing of his intimate experiences often in myths–allows readers to reframe their own experiences within a mature view of larger implications and perspectives. A "knowledge eked out of 'the essential ambivalence of human response'" is how David McCooey describes Shapcott's courageous contribution to the wider sharing and remembering.

Thomas W. Shapcott has created a corpus of work of enduring value. His individual works, with their great variation in quality, have been widely reviewed from different vantage points, yet critical overviews are still rare. While scholars are beginning to address the collaboration with Colin Brumby, Shapcott's influence on contemporary Australian poetry (and especially the rise of "New Australian Poetry" during the 1960s) extends far beyond his own creative writings through his extensive reviews, work as an editor, teacher, and judge, role in committees, and work as a public servant. His influence extends beyond the boundaries of his own country, to Europe and America.

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Thomas W. Shapcott's papers are held by the Fryer Library, University of Queensland; the National Library of Australia; and the Australian Defence Force Academy.